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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 RPO DUBAI 000013

SIPDIS
NOFORN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2035/01/12

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN'S GREEN PARTY OPPOSITION: ITS BIRTH AND EVOLUTION (1/3)

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11. (C) SUMMARY: Iran's Green Path Opposition (GPO) came into being as a result of the fixed June 12 Presidential election. What started as a movement to annul the election now gives shelter both to those seeking the full set of rights guaranteed them by Islamic Iran's Constitution and others seeking a new system altogether. Although the numbers of those publicly willing to march under its banner have decreased in the face of regime brutality, its current core group, mostly college-age urban youth, have shown no sign of giving up the fight. But like the regime that seeks to crush it, the GPO is not monolithic and there is a clear gulf between the opposition's elite leadership and the popular movement protesting in the streets. Remaining outside the umbrella of the GPO is an array of unsatisfied groups whose willingness to join the GPO is unclear. These groups clearly oppose President Ahmadinejad but do not yet seek, as do many GPO elements, to overturn the entire system. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) NOTE: This is the first in a series of three cables examining the Iranian Opposition since the June 12 Presidential election, what might happen in the short-term, and what the most effective levers of US policy have been so far and what combination may have the most impact in the coming months.

11. BIRTH OF THE GPO

13. (C) ELECTION BUILD-UP AND ORIGINS OF THE GREEN PATH OPPOSITION: Iran's current unrest began in June 2009, when Iran's lackluster Presidential campaign became energized by a (first-time) series of televised debates among the four Presidential candidates: former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi (reformist), former Speaker Mehdi Karrubi (reformist), Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai (moderate conservative) and President Ahmadinejad (hard-line conservative). President Ahmadinejad's accusations that former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami were 'plotting' against his government and, along with Mousavi and other reformists, sought to undermine the Revolution and to enrich themselves, galvanized ordinary Iranians. Incivility and accusations at odds with obligatory Persian politesse left many observers with the impression (discomforting for some, energizing for others) that the elections might actually be more of a true contest than past elections, and that Ahmadinejad might actually be vulnerable to an upset.

14. (C) These Presidential debates sparked popular interest in the election, and in the last week or so before the June 12 vote reformist candidate Mousavi, with active and behind-the-scenes support from Khatami and Rafsanjani, increasingly gained momentum, with his supporters for the first time beginning to speak publicly of a 'Green Movement.' Part of his support were young, first-time voters; part were revitalized older 'Second of Khordad' reformists who had turned out in record number to support Khatami in 1997 and 2001, but who had subsequently soured on politics due to Khatami's inability to effect change. Another large group of first-time voters were from the ranks of the "Khamoush" ('silent') - ie, Iranians who had never voted but who were inspired by prospects for positive change and had hope that this election would be genuine. Mousavi may have even drawn some support for older and more conservative voters who remembered his steady stewardship of Iran's economy during his stint as Prime Minister during the 1980's Iran-Iraq War.

15. (C) ELECTION DAY: IRIG elections have never been 'free and fair,' but until June 2009 most electoral machinations consisted primarily of the conservative Guardian Council screening out ideologically undesirable candidates, plus vote manipulation at relatively low levels, including using the Basij to 'get out the vote.' Conventional wisdom going into June 12 was that a high turnout -- representing energized young and urban voters -- would favor Mousavi, who would need a few million vote 'cushion' in order

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to either win outright or to get into a subsequent two-man runoff with Ahmadinejad. While we don't know nor might not ever know the real June 12 vote count, it is clear that the turnout was at record high levels and that there was systematic vote count fraud (if in fact the votes were even counted) to ensure that Ahmadinejad 'won big' in the first round.

16. (C) Why the fix? In retrospect, many of the reasons seem clear. Part of the answer could relate to SLK's desire to have unified control over the three branches of government to strengthen Iran's hand, and his hand personally, in expected upcoming negotiations with the West and the US over nuclear issues. More certainly, part of the answer is that after the 1997-2005 Khatami Presidency, Supreme Leader Khamenei (SLK) was determined to prevent any reformist, especially his former political opponent Mousavi, from heading the Executive Branch. SLK considers Rafsanjani his most serious rival, and is also intimidated by Khatami's popularity. Therefore, that both Rafsanjani and Khatami supported Mousavi may have led SLK to conclude that a Mousavi victory would consolidate power in the hands of those bitter rivals and leave him unacceptably vulnerable to marginalization. And part of the answer relates to the increasingly powerful IRGC hardline faction that had supported Ahmadinejad (AN) in 2005, whose support AN strengthened over the subsequent four years by using government funds and patronage to increase this faction's power and wealth. As such, this hardline IRGC faction, composed mostly of high-level officers with a shared intelligence-security background, wanted 'four more years,' despite mixed support for AN from within the IRGC ranks. Anecdotal information indicates that this hardline faction had convinced SLK that the election could be fixed with minimal backlash.

17. (C) They were wrong, as shown by the unprecedented sight of millions of ordinary Iranians pouring into the streets chanting 'where is my vote.' On June 19, SLK abandoned his carefully cultivated pretense of non-partisanship and took the first steps down the long road of post-election suppression when he lauded the 'epic' June 12 vote and told those disputing the results to stop protesting and fall in line or face the consequences. In response, what started as the pre-election 'Green Movement' slowly began changing into the 'Green Path of Hope' Opposition (GPO), as

reformist leaders Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami signaled that they would not stand down.

18. (C) REGIME RESPONSE: Regime reaction to ongoing post-election GPO activity was swift, conducted at both the popular and elite level:

- At the elite level the regime began a widespread intimidation campaign to include Stalinesque show trials, rounding up not only 'all the usual suspects' (i.e. first-tier reformists, primarily those associated with Khatami's 'Second of Khordad' movement), but also their family members, in addition to second-tier reformists, political and human rights activists, and reporters. Many if not most of these detained, to include those arrests that garnered the most publicity in the West, played no significant role in either promoting Mousavi's candidacy or in engendering post-election protests. However anecdotal evidence indicates there have been extensive arrests of younger, lesser-known activists more active in the GPO. Within the regime, SLK acted quickly to bring into line as many key power brokers as possible, including traditional conservatives like Majlis Speaker Larijani, former IRGC commander (and defeated Presidential candidate) Mohsen Rezai, and Tehran Mayor Qalibaf - all of whom oppose Ahmadinejad and would have been happy to see him go, but whose loyalty to the System and to the Leader trumped concerns they may have had about the extent of the voting fraud.

- At the popular level the regime increasingly resorted to force on those public holidays when GPO supporters took to the streets. The following were the key dates on which the GPO took to the streets:

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-- 20 June 2009: The day after SLK's gauntlet-throwing Friday Prayer speech saw several hundred thousand Iranians march in Tehran to protest, and also witnessed the first significant use of regime force against protestors. The killing of one young marcher, Neda Agha Soltani, captured on video, focused global attention on the protests and gave the GPO a tragic but iconic image of martyrdom to wield against the regime.

-- June 28, 2009 (7th of Tir): The first time the GPO used the cover of an officially sanctioned ceremony to rally against the government. GPO supporters, led by a key Mousavi aide, caught security forces off guard by taking over an annual ceremony to mark the 1981 bombing that killed several leaders of the Revolution.

-- July 17, 2009: The first and only time since June 12 when former President Rafsanjani, in many ways the main target of hardline regime animus, was allowed to give the Tehran Friday Prayer sermon. Rafsanjani's much anticipated speech, in which he did not acquiesce to the official election results, energized opposition supporters and led to street clashes.

-- September 18, 2009 (Ghods Day): The government-orchestrated event to demonstrate solidarity with Palestinians was co-opted by hundreds of thousands of GPO supporters flaunting green and chanting anti-government slogans. Ghods Day was the zenith of the GPO's ability to bring significant number to the streets, and the last time when security forces by and large eschewed violence;

-- November 4, 2009 (US Embassy Takeover Anniversary): The GPO hoped to replicate Ghods Day during the first large-scale protest

since university campuses reopened. Increasingly ominous warnings from the security forces and revelations of detainee abuse resulted in smaller GPO turnout, and more violent clashes than previously;

-- December 27, 2009 (Ashura and 7th Mourning Day for Grand Ayatollah Montazeri): Ashura witnessed the most violent clashes since June 20, with at least nine killed. Violent clashes also took place in major cities outside of Tehran.

II. WHERE WE ARE NOW

¶9. (C) WHAT IS THE OPPOSITION: Up to now the GPO's most significant tool of resistance is popular turnout in the form of peaceful marching and civil disobedience on those holidays when the regime cannot prevent people taking to the streets. However, ongoing regime violence against protesters has decreased GPO turnout, from the millions of June 15 to a smaller committed core of (at most) hundreds of thousands. Much if not most of them are young, college-age Iranians, and understandably the vast majority of opposition turnout appears to have been in Tehran, although other major urban centers have also seen sporadic unrest. Although the number of GPO'ers willing to take to the streets has decreased from the days immediately following the June election, those remaining on the streets seem to have radicalized, with at least some opposition animus from AN to SLK: the new emblematic chant is no longer 'where is my vote' but 'death to the dictator (i.e. SLK).' At the elite level, not only are Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami the focus on hardline regime pressure, but former President Rafsanjani is under ongoing attack by these same forces.

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¶10. (C) The GPO has a strong 'brand' - green, freedom, peace signs, silent marches, stolen election and martyrs like Neda Agha Soltani. But like the regime that seeks to crush it, the GPO is not monolithic. To characterize the GPO's active core as now primarily (but not exclusively) university students and university-age youth in a country so demographically young (for example, approximately one quarter of the population is in its twenties) is not to belittle its potential. Outside of the active GPO core group there is a larger, relatively passive group, whose support now mostly manifests in the anonymous shouts of 'God is Great' from night-time North Tehran rooftops or who scrawl or stamp anti-regime slogans on ten thousand Toman currency notes. Presumably many of them have fled the field due to fear of regime reprisal but might be drawn back into the fray if the prospects of a GPO victory, however defined, became more real to them than the prospect of blows from a Basiji baton.

¶11. (C) OTHER OPPOSITIONS: Stepping back, it is wrong to assume that the GPO is the logical equivalent of 'the Iranian opposition,' and indeed it is more accurate to speak of many different Iranian oppositions, each with different constituents and goals, to include the following:

- BUREAUCRACY: AN has effected vast bureaucratic top-down Executive branch personnel changes, ignoring the technocratic cadre that was the recruitment pool for the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies. Given his preference for ideology over expertise ('mota'hed' versus 'motakhasses'), he has staffed his government largely from within the current and former IRGC ranks. Many of these former ministers, deputy ministers, office heads and other senior bureaucrats have not been pleased with their professional fates. At lower government levels, there is anecdotal evidence of widespread disgruntlement with if not opposition to AN.

-MILITARY/INTELLIGENCE: AN and his hardline IRGC backers have extensively purged the Intelligence Ministry on the grounds of partisan loyalty, creating a significant cadre of disgruntled former Intelligence Ministry officials. Similarly, there is evidence of at least some IRGC opposition, both within the rank and file and also the upper ranks, at SLK's handling of the election and post-election events.

- INDUSTRIALISTS: AN's massive economic mismanagement and the ongoing economic power grab of 'IRGC Incorporated' has engendered much ill will among Iran's affluent and influential industrial leaders.

- RAFSANJANI/CLERGY: Rafsanjani's institutional power is minimal, but as part of his strategy he seeks to retain/expand his support within Iran's clerical class, although this class itself is increasingly impotent and dependent on government favor. As one element of the regime's efforts to limit the pro-GPO clergy's influence, it has taken steps in recent weeks to challenge the religious titles and credentials of at least one top-level reformist cleric ("Grand Ayatollah"). This move will not likely endear the regime to many if not most Iranian traditional seminarians who take matters of religious credentials, learning, and hierarchy very seriously, especially given SLK's own lack of qualifications for his religious title.

- 'MODERATE' PRINCIPLISTS: Within the ruling conservative 'Principlist' ('Osulgarayan') grouping there is a significant faction opposing AN, though still quite loyal to SLK and the concept of 'Supreme Jurisconsulate.' One of this faction's leaders is Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, with the Majlis as a whole in an ongoing battle with AN's increasingly 'imperial' Executive Branch. Other major Principlist opponents are Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf and Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai.

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GPO LEADERSHIP- STREET

¶12. (C) The GPO has promulgated a new mode of oppositionist organization for Iran. Anecdotal evidence indicates that GPO leaders, especially Mousavi, have from the start favored a horizontal, diffuse, decentralized GPO structure as opposed to a more hierarchical one. Indeed, part of the GPO's resilience stems from this diffuse and decentralized nature, frustrating a regime that has come to rely on the two-step of identifying and decapitating leadership as its main tool for extinguishing dissent. In this regard communication technologies such as the Internet and SMS technology have been a significant 'force multiplier,' with virtual space in many ways playing the same 'information-center' role now that the networks of mosques played in the 1979 Revolution. GPO leaders Karrubi, Mousavi and Khatami play a role both symbolic and also operational, with anecdotal evidence indicating that they are playing at least a limited role in coordinating with if not leading the GPO masses. Additionally, for the first time since the Revolution elements of the Iranian Diaspora seem to be playing a role within events in Iran, coordinating with GPO leadership elements inside the country.

¶13. (C) Distance between the titular GPO leadership and the street may yield tactical advantages, though it also reflects a gulf between the leadership and the popular opposition. Mousavi,

Karrubi, and Khatami are longstanding fixtures of the Islamic Republic, making them ill suited to lead a radicalizing movement calling for the overthrow of that system. Certainly they retain support from the broader opposition, but many, and particularly the more radicalized elements, do not look to Mousavi et al for leadership. In particular, IRPO contacts in their 20s and 30s discount the notion that anyone previously associated with 'the Nezam' ('the System') could accurately represent their interests and aspirations. The regime, however, has proved particularly effective at neutralizing emerging leaders from the post-Revolution generations.

¶14. (C) Within the GPO there is no consensus on its goals. What started as a movement merely to annul the election results now gives shelter both to those seeking the full set of rights guaranteed them by Islamic Iran's Constitution and others seeking a new system of governance altogether. Much like the ambiguity in its leadership, the unspecified nature of its goals allow it to have a 'bigger tent.' Mousavi's recent five point declaration calling for restoring press freedom, creating a fair and transparent election law, freeing all political prisoners, and recognizing the peoples' right to gather and to form political associations and parties, was however an attempt by the GPO leaderships to begin to delimit the scope of their ambitions.

¶15. (C) Heretofore the GPO has yet to adopt any sort of an economic agenda or set of grievances as part of a core opposition message, and perhaps the absence of one partially underscores the relative 'bourgeois' leanings of the GPO. Anecdotal information indicates that unemployment and a potential spike in inflation (expected with the recent decision to end subsidies) increasingly concern a large number of Iranians. IRPO contacts and Iranian press reporting also indicate another spike in labor unrest, due to the parlous state of Iran's factories and their inability to pay their workers on time. One would think that a message that capitalizes on these economic concerns juxtaposed against President Ahmadinejad's (and by extension the Revolution's) economic mismanagement and continued corruption would attract a wide spectrum of socio-economic groups to a more broad-based GPO. However, for whatever reason, in contemporary Iran it has been political and not economic themes that have been more effective in mobilizing the Iranian people, and economic concerns on their own have rarely drawn large protests in Iran's thirty-year post-revolutionary history.

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¶16. (U) COMMENT: The June 12 election and its subsequent protests/crackdown was a tectonic shift in Iranian domestic politics. At the elite level it destroyed Khamenei's non-partisan veneer, placing him securely in the center of a no holds-barred political fray. It also redefined the sets of insider ('khodi') and outsider ('qeyr-e khodi') so that not only were Second of Khordad Reformists on the outs, but so was former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and those aligned with him. In this regard, at the elite level the central dynamic in many ways can be seen as Supreme Leader Khamenei, AN and the hard-line intelligence-security IRGC faction on one side and former President Rafsanjani on the other, with all of Iran's political elite being pressured to openly take sides (NOTE: there is a substantial economic element to this dynamic, as in many ways Ahmadinejad's ascension to power coincides with attempts by a new cohort elite, largely composed of hardline IRGC 'intelligence-security' elements, to secure positions of wealth and influence formerly occupied by Rafsanjani loyalists). Certainly many hardline regime elements see Rafsanjani and his eldest son Mehdi as the 'head' to the GPO 'body,' and assume that if Rafsanjani were neutralized then the GPO's threat potential would be far less.

¶17. (C) COMMENT (CONT): According to IRPO contacts close to the Rafsanjani circle, Rafsanjani is still unsuccessfully seeking to persuade Supreme Leader Khamenei that AN and his crowd are a far

greater threat to the Islamic Republic than any threat that Khamenei might feel from Rafsanjani, and that SLK should withdraw his support for them. For their part, the regime continues to pressure Rafsanjani through (inter alia) judicial and other pressure on his family, such that his eldest son Mehdi has fled abroad and cannot return. A weakened Rafsanjani has minimal institutional power, given that the Expediency Council is subordinate to Khamenei and that the clerics in the Experts Council are too cowed or beholden to the government to oppose them. As such, Rafsanjani keeps a low public profile while at the same time trying to rally elite support, to include moderate conservatives and influential IRGC commanders. The regime is unlikely to more directly target Rafsanjani unless and until Rafsanjani were to become more confrontational.

¶18. (C) COMMENT (CONT): At the popular level, June 12 has revived a popular reformist movement largely quiescent after the eight Khatami years while also bringing large parts of Iran's youngest generation into the fray. This opposition, however, is not unified. The GPO now is a bifurcated movement, coupling a largely student-dominated mass following with a titular, elite leadership, and the two parts are not a cohesive whole. This rather diffuse organization may be a key to its staying power and simultaneously an impediment to building an opposition movement that could challenge the viability of the current government. Beyond the GPO is an array of unsatisfied groups whose willingness to join the GPO is unclear. These groups clearly oppose President Ahmadinejad but do not yet seek, as do many GPO elements, to overturn the entire system. END COMMENT.
EYRE